

The most antisemitic university president you've never heard of

Johns Hopkins University must remove Isaiah Bowman from a place of honor



Exterior, Gilman Hall, looking west, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, 1922. Photo by [JHU Sheridan Libraries/Gado/Getty Images](#)

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Since 2020, the year George Floyd was murdered, nine major universities — including [Caltech](#), [Princeton](#), and [Stanford](#) — have stripped honors from their presidents who held office during the 20th century. The reason was their abhorrent racial beliefs, including [eugenic racism](#), a pseudoscience that seeks to justify white supremacy.

But to this day, amid spiking antisemitism after Hamas' devastating Oct. 7 attack and Israel's ensuing war, universities continue to honor leaders who held deeply bigoted views of Jews. Among the worst of those offenders is Johns Hopkins University.

[Isaiah Bowman](#), the university's president from 1935 to 1948, is commemorated on campus both by a memorial bust and a nearby road that bears his name. Bowman, a eugenic racist, also was a fierce antisemite who placed quotas on Jewish faculty and students while actively working to thwart Jews' attempts to flee the horror inflicted by the Nazis.

The belief system behind eugenic racism posited a hierarchy of races based on genetic inheritance. At the summit, eugenic racists believed, were northwestern Europeans designated as Aryans or Nordics. They were described as intelligent, attractive, ethical and hard-working. Those below, including Jews, had fewer desirable traits. Africans, including African Americans, were at the bottom.

To prevent the demographic replacement of superiors by inferiors — a fear echoed in today's Great Replacement Theory — eugenic racists opposed interracial marriage, favored forced sterilization, and sought to reduce [immigration](#) from Asia and southern and eastern Europe. Bowman believed that stringent immigration quotas would exclude those whose “intellectual dispositions dilute and weaken our national character.”

Bowman grew up on a Michigan farm, studied at Harvard and Yale, and began his career with a stint teaching geography at Yale. This was followed by twenty years as president of the American Geographical Society (AGS), during which he served as President Wilson's chief cartographer at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. The achievement was tainted by his opposition to Jewish efforts at the conference to obtain civil rights in Poland, Romania, and elsewhere.

Eugenic racism was in the air—at Harvard and Yale, and among members of the AGS, some of whom were its most radical exponents. One such member was Madison Grant, a white supremacist and notorious antisemite, whom Bowman appointed six times to serve on the AGS board.

Bowman brought his racial biases to Johns Hopkins when he became president in 1935.



Isaiah Bowman, 1947. Photo by JHU Sheridan Libraries/Gado/Getty Images

Historians Robert Kargon and Elizabeth Hodes report that Frank B. Jewett, head of Bell Labs and an admirer of Bowman's, was instrumental in the trustees' choice of Bowman. Jewett was a well-known antisemite who refused to employ Jews at the labs, a policy that did not change until he stepped down in 1940.

Unlike its [peers](#), the university placed no cap on the number of Jewish students it admitted in the 1920s. But during the Second World War, Bowman instituted a clandestine quota set at 10%, about half the percentage of Jewish students when he arrived. He did this as several other elite universities were moving in the opposite direction. By 1952, 25% of Harvard's students were

Jewish, whereas Hopkins still had the Bowman quota, although it would soon be phased out. African American students fared worse; Bowman refused to admit them.

Bowman's contempt for Jewish students ran deep. "Jews don't come to Hopkins to make the world better or anything like that," he said. "They come for two things: to make money and to marry non-Jewish women."

Bowman repeatedly blocked the hiring and retention of Jewish professors. Three years after the history department appointed [Eric F. Goldman](#), a brilliant young scholar, Goldman's contract was not renewed because Bowman felt "there are already too many Jews at Hopkins." Bowman imposed a cap of one Jew per department but the School of Medicine was autonomous.

[James Franck](#) — physicist, Nobelist, and German Jewish emigre — left Johns Hopkins for the University of Chicago after four years because, he said, Bowman "made life very difficult for Jewish faculty." Franck was astonished when Bowman suggested he moved to Chicago for the pay, the old slur that Jews care only about money.

It's true that Bowman openly criticized the Nazis for their territorial ambitions. It's also true that he never said a word publicly to condemn their treatment of Jews.

That's just as well. On a visit to Germany in August 1938, he wrote a letter reporting on conversations he was having with Germans about what he called "the Jewish business." According to Bowman, Germans grumbled that during the Weimar years, Jews gained undeserved opportunities. He heard Germans argue that Jews had appeared in places they'd never been before and behaved arrogantly. Bowman admitted that some of the complaints may have echoed Nazi propaganda, but also, tellingly, added that "they may be right in spots."

There's disagreement about the adequacy of President Franklin Roosevelt's response to the crisis in Europe. Sympathizers say that his humanitarian instinct to admit more refugees was constrained by opposition from voters and Congressional isolationists. Critics argue that he was cautious to a fault and sought to offload the burden on other nations, as at the failed Évian conference he convened in July 1938.



Eugenics Society exhibit, 1930s. Courtesy of Wellcome Society

That November came Kristallnacht, at which time Roosevelt suggested that refugees might be resettled in Latin America. He asked Bowman, an expert on Latin America whom the president had known since 1921, to be his “special advisor” on refugees.

Bowman’s advice and his behavior at Hopkins were of a piece: [keep Jews away](#). He struck down every Latin American location Roosevelt suggested for resettling Jews fleeing Hitler, citing an inhospitable climate and other problems. It’s possible that Latin America’s proximity to the United States caused Bowman to fear a subsequent influx of Jews to this country. Immigrants from Central and South America were exempt from the quotas established in the 1924 immigration law.

Bowman also recommended curbing Jewish immigration to Australia out of fear that Jews might become too powerful a force there: “The danger lies in Jewish control of the economic organization if too many are allowed into the country,” he wrote in 1942. Here was another antisemitic staple, which the Nazis at that very time were using to perpetrate a genocide.

Bowman’s reluctance to open pathways to help rescue European Jews operated at a personal level, too. In spring 1941, [Alfred Philippson](#), the only Jewish geographer in Germany to hold the highest academic rank, was under house arrest with his family. A rescue campaign commenced, led by Philippson’s colleagues. Bowman’s 20 years at the AGS made him well known among geographers. Several appealed to him to hire Philippson to give lectures at Hopkins or help raise funds to bring him to safety in Switzerland. That fall, Bowman was told that the situation was dire, yet he made no promise to do anything.

Come March 1942, Bowman still had not acted. The following month, the Nazis sent the Philippsons to Theresienstadt. Fortunately, they survived. Philippson’s biographer believes that, “Because Bowman was such a well-known and respected professor, who had a lot of power and influence, he himself could have reacted differently and could have been an ideal to others.”